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PROGRAM Take Two

STATION CNN-TV

DATE May 22, 1984 12:00 Noon CITY Atlanta, Ga.

SUBJECT The CIA

CHRIS CURLE: Right now we want to continue our series of reports on the CIA, the Central Intelligence Agency. The agency has been criticized in the past for covert activity. Charges of engineering foreign coups, assassination attempts in foreign lands, and most recently the mining of Nicaragua's harbor. In today's report, CNN's Gene Randall looks at the ethics of the CIA's covert activities.

GENE RANDALL: Nicaraguan rebels, Contras fighting the Sandinista government with money and weapons from the Central Intelligence Agency, covert action. It is one way the CIA does the Reagan Administration's bidding in Central America, though covert action has been around since the CIA was founded in 1947. It is defined by the agency as a special activity abroad in support of United States foreign policy objectives and executed so that the role of the United States Government is not apparent or acknowledged publicly.

In the case of Central America, onetime National Security Council staff member Morton Halperin says the Reagan Administration has substituted covert action for policy.

MORTON HALPERIN: If, for example, the Reagan Administration thinks that the government in Nicaragua is a threat to the security interests of the United States and needs to be overthrown, then it needs to defend that publicly and try to get a consensus for it.

RANDALL: Of course, the White House has never said its aim is to bring down the Nicaraguan regime. But that is the Contras' goal, and we are supporting the Contras.

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Approved For Release 2008/08/21 : CIA-RDP88-01070R000201210005-9

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: They were denied power in the new government. Some were imprisoned, others exiled. Thousands who fought with the Sandinistas have taken up arms against them and are now called the Contras. They are freedom fighters.

RANDALL: The CIA role in Nicaragua has long been an open secret. Not even the mining of three Nicaraguan harbors could be kept covered up.

Former CIA Deputy Director Ray Cline:

RAY CLINE: Of course, the mines in Nicaragua were not much of a military solution. As you know, they were more a psychological pressure to drive up the cost of shipping and make a kind of psychological blockade, if you like. But that is what covert action usually is, a soft action to take the place of a military action.

RANDALL: Cline and others see covert action, then, as a kind of middle ground between doing nothing and sending in the Marines. Critics, however, charge that too often in the past the CIA has abused that concept.

Onetime CIA Director Stansfield Turner says too much money is going into covert action.

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: There is a real place for covert action in our country's capabilities. It is much more limited than I believe this Administration understands.

RANDALL: But while there is wide agreement on the legitimacy of covert actions in certain situations, there is also the question of where to draw the line.

For instance, investigations have never turned up proof that the CIA assassinated a foreign leader. Though, as a former agency director puts it:

WILLIAM COLBY: It wasn't for lack of trying in Mr. Castro's case. And I don't stand for that.

RANDALL: Colby wrote the regulation that there would be no assassination attempts except in time of war. He supports covert action, but with moral considerations.

COLBY: I think the problem is, are you going to conduct an operation which has a reasonable chance of success and, if it is exposed, will not shock the American people, will not be so beyond what our limits of ethics are that the American people would repudiate it?

RANDALL: Then there is the issue of responsibility.

Senior American intelligence officials are quick to point out that the CIA does not act on its own; that covert actions, as those in Nicaragua, are carried out with presidential approval.

Administration critic Morton Halperin says the CIA is conducting covert operations all over the world. But he agrees it is the President who's calling the shots.

HALPERIN: We have referred to these covert operations as Reagan's secret wars. And I think that's what they are.

RANDALL: Still, the fact is CIA Director William Casey is one of President Reagan's closest advisers.

Congressman Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma, a member of the House Intelligence Committee, says that raises a serious question.

REP. DAVE MCCURDY: It's hard to say who's pushing whom and who's directing whom, because I think they're probably in sync or very close in their philosophical views about these types of operation.

RANDALL: Finally, there is concern that covert action distorts the political process.

Author and CIA-watcher David Wise:

DAVID WISE: In addition, the argument has been made that covert operations, at least those on a scale such as in Nicaragua today, that are large paramilitary operations, violate the provision in the Constitution that Congress shall declare war. After all, these are mini-wars.

RANDALL: In our next report, the last in this series, we'll take a look at the role congressional oversight plays in the nation's intelligence effort; and the argument that if oversight will never be perfect, it can certainly be a lot better.